

Oldtime Cowboy Talk Was Salty; Today's Could Stand Seasoning

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MERTZON, Texas — The other morning, just before dawn, another small shower passed over this shortgrass country delaying the finish of our second shearing go-round. It was one of those near-mist affairs that illustrate how fairly the Great Society is treating the ranchman. The clouds held enough moisture to benefit, say, 10 sections of ranch land, but the shower was distributed over 100 sections.

However, regardless of how little effect the rain had on our grass, it gave us occasion to loaf and talk while the sheep were drying out. Nobody made any money during this waiting period except the day workers and manufacturers of cigarettes and coffee.

Observing the idle men, I thought of the difference between them and their predecessors of bygone years. On the surface they didn't look or smell much different from mounted sheep herders of 20 years ago; except for the fact that nobody was rolling a cigarette, they look about the same as their forerunners of the thirties.

But their conversation was something else. Linking these jet-age sheep chousers' talk with that of yesteryears' hands would be comparable to taking a reincarnated Caruso and trying to fit him in with the Beatles.

These modern hands were not whipping and spurring imaginary wild horses until the gyrations of their arms threatened to upset the molasses pitcher, nor roping and fairgrounding heavy stock with such violence that their stamping boots shook the floor and the cook had to brace his oven door with a chair.

Instead they were calmly discussing the Vietnam situation and one of them reviewed, of all things, a book on Adams Smith's theories of economics.

There were no tales of rides that would give Jim Shoulders a nightmare. There was no reference to fist fights so bloody they would sicken an old matador coach, nor even the slightest inference that one of the group might at one time have been such a hand with the ladies that Errol Flynn had considered hiring him as a mentor.

Weirdly omitted was the yarn about fixing a windmill that pumped from such a depth that the water tasted exactly like that of the Yang River in China. If anybody present had roped, tied and marked every type animal from a hairy marmot to a Kodiak bear, he refrained from mentioning it.

Although this small gathering by no means represented a cross section of the country's cowboys, it did give a good example of how fast the western scene could fade from the earth. For if all stockhands should concern themselves exclusively with lofty books on economics, and if cattle continue to become as gentle as an old maid's favorite cat, it won't be long till the flavor of the Old West will be hopelessly lost.

It is already apparent that this vanishing way of life is turning into a prosaic, mechanized existence with more horses learning to leap into covered trailers than to head an animal.

If we do not take action to recharge these boys' imagination, the last vestige of the romance of the range will pass on. Rancher and cowboy alike will lose their image; movie makers and fiction writers will have to turn to machine shops for their material.

It's sad to contemplate the day when the bunkhouse table will be surrounded by men who never heard about the old bay pony that could throw a double-rigged, tight-cinched saddle on the first jump. Or the time when the biggest, meanest bull that was ever watered in Texas was put to the ground so hard that the impact shook Kansas City.